DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 783 CS 212 223

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|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Cousin, Patricia Tefft; Stires, Susan |
| TITLE | Remembering Our Students. |
| INSTITUTION | North Dakota Univ., Grand Forks. Center for Teaching and Learning. |
| PUB DATE | Mar 90 |
| NOTE | 15p.; Printed on colored paper. Figures 6-13 will copy poorly. |
| PUB TYPE | Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) |
| JOURNAL CIT | Insights into Open Education; v22 n6 March 1990 |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Case Studies; Elementary Education; Learning Problems; Reading Skills; *Reading Writing Relationship; *Teacher Response; Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; Writing Exercises; *Writing Improvement; Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; Writing Readiness |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Emergent Literacy; Teacher Researchers; Writing Contexts; *Writing Development |

ABSTRACT

There are students whom teachers always seem to remember, primarily because they provide special insight into teaching and learning. These students, most of whom usually have learning difficulties in school, teach important lessons to teachers about determination, survival, and about becoming readers and writers. One such student is Kimberly, whose first grade year had been disastrous due to health problems and difficulties with language. The teacher and Kimberly began working together in second grade by drawing pictures and matching them with texts. Gradually Kimberly produced independent writing. By the sixth grade she had learned the appropriate use of conventions and found reading to be a recreational activity. Another such student is Andrea, a fifth grader who had experienced language development problems evidenced by her brief incoherent prose. The teacher collaborated with Andrea over idea generation and revision. Andrea had to be shown that rehearsal (making lists, taking notes, sketching, and especially talking) was necessary. Through extensive process/conferencing with the teacher, Andrea was gradually ready to take charge of her learning. Both students provide insight on how struggling students are able to reposition their view of themselves and to create a new image of themselves as reader and writer. (Thirteen figures containing writing samples from both students are included.) (KEH)

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ED315783

CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
GRAND FORKS 58202

Volume 22, Number 6
March 1990

# Remembering Our Students

by

Patricia Tefft Cousin and Susan Stires

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# Remembering Our Students

# by

# Patricia Tefft Cousin and Susan Stires

## Introduction

In all of our lives as teachers there are students who we always seem to remember. We remember them for many reasons. But primarily, we think, because these students have taught us something important about teaching and learning. Two stories written by teacher-researchers follow.

Each of us has written about a student, having learning difficulties in school, who has taught us each most important lessons—lessons about determination, lessons about survival, lessons about becoming readers and writers. In a recent presentation, Frank Smith (1988) said that "we become the person we imagine ourselves as being." Each of these students did not believe that he/she could be a reader and a writer. But through their experiences in classrooms where there was the expectation that they would read and write and the opportunity to do so, they were able to reposition their view of themselves and others' views of them to create a new image—that of a reader and a writer.

As you read these stories, we'd like you to join us and remember those students who have taught you important lessons about teaching and learning. We believe that stories like these frame our lives as teachers and provide us with the impetus that we need to continue our work in classrooms.

## Remembering Kimberly

by

Patricia Tefft Cousin

As I reflect on my years as a teacher and remember particular students, Kimberly always comes to mind. I visualize Kimberly; her long black curly hair in braids, her light brown skin, her cautious smile. I hear her mischievous laugh and I see her at different ages, at seven, at ten, and at twelve. Kimberly followed me through my teaching career. As busing plans were shifted and changed, my teaching assignment and Kimberly's assigned school always coincided. I first met Kimberly as a second grader in my self-contained special education class. Kimberly's first grade year had been disastrous. Cerebral palsy caused a minor tremor and affected Kimberly's large and small motor proficiency. Difficulties with language also contributed to the problems she had with learning. Interestingly, the psychologists never felt that they were able to get a valid I.Q. score on Kimberly. It was as if Kimberly recognized that such an instrument could never measure what she was.

### Kimberly at Seven

It was an early September day and Kimberly and I sat together at a table in the room. I was just beginning to implement a writing process program in my classroom. I asked Kimberly to draw a picture and write a story about her picture. After she finished, I looked at her product. As a novice in the area of analyzing early writing, her drawing and writing looked like scribbles to me. Deciphering her written name was impossible. As we talked about her story, Kimberly's interests seemed more typical of a three or four year old. This is where we began—Kimberly learning how to communicate through written language and myself learning how to best support her learning. Kimberly and I spent the year together drawing

pictures, writing stories, and reading books. By the end of the school year, Kimberly made significant progress. She enjoyed literacy related experiences and began to make some attempts at composing stories on her own. She wrote her name and would often make lists of the names of family members. As Kimberly became more involved in literacy, her behavior problems decreased.

I was also a learner that year. As I worked with Kimberly she provided many demonstrations for me; demonstrations of how reading and writing become important to students and how they come to understand that written language makes sense. I observed how Kimberly had to learn how to make connections between her personal experiences and how print could be used to tell about these experiences. Using that understanding as a basis, she could then understand how print was used to tell of the experiences of others. I also learned how students develop their understandings of both the functions and forms of written language.

**Kimberly at Nine**

After spending a year on sabbatical leave, I began the next year at a new school and heard about an unruly and difficult 4th grader with whom I was to work that year. I was surprised to find out that the other teachers were talking about Kimberly! And she was certainly surprised to find that I was her teacher again! As I began working with her I noticed from her work folder that she spent the previous year using a linguistic reading program. I wondered if Kimberly had difficulties with this program since it was based on a very different view of the language process than I had emphasized with her.

As we began working together again, I asked Kimberly to write a story and illustrate it. She drew pictures of two people and then told me that she could not write. I reminded her that she had composed stories for me at the other school. After much deliberation, she wrote cat, cat, rat, fat, paused a moment and then added rat, cat, rat. She then drew some cats and rats at the bottom of her picture and said that she was finished (See Figure 1, Front Cover).

When I asked Kimberly to read her story, she read the words written on the page and handedme the story with a big grin on her face. Kimberly produced what she thought I wanted and based that decision on her most recent instructional experience. She produced what she thought the context demanded, along with satisfying her own idea of making sense. She knew that her initial picture did not match the words that she had written, so she added the drawings of the cats and rats after rereading her writing. She appeared satisfied with that strategy and her text in general. She matched picture with text and wrote according to the model of the linguistic program. Kimberly made a sophisticated observation of what was expected in the instructional setting and compiled accordingly. I had not expected that Kimberly would be so attuned to the focus of the language program. This demonstration was a significant one for me. Although I had read research discussing how students assume the language model of the teacher (Harste & Burke, 1978), I was not prepared for such a powerful affirmation of it. I easily assumed that Kimberly and students with similar problems did not particularly attend to what was happening in the classroom, yet here was such strong evidence that Kimberly had learned exactly what had been taught.

After a month of daily writing, Kimberly began to write and illustrate simple stories. She sometimes used syntax similar to that in the linguistic program. However, she began to convey information of concern to her, and similar to her work of two years before, her stories and writing focused on herself and her family. In these situations, she focused on communicating ideas, rather than writing only words that she knew how to spell or words that she could copy from a reader.

Unfortunately, Kimberly transferred to another school in mid-October. In cleaning out her desk, I found many short stories with illustrations all similar in context and style.

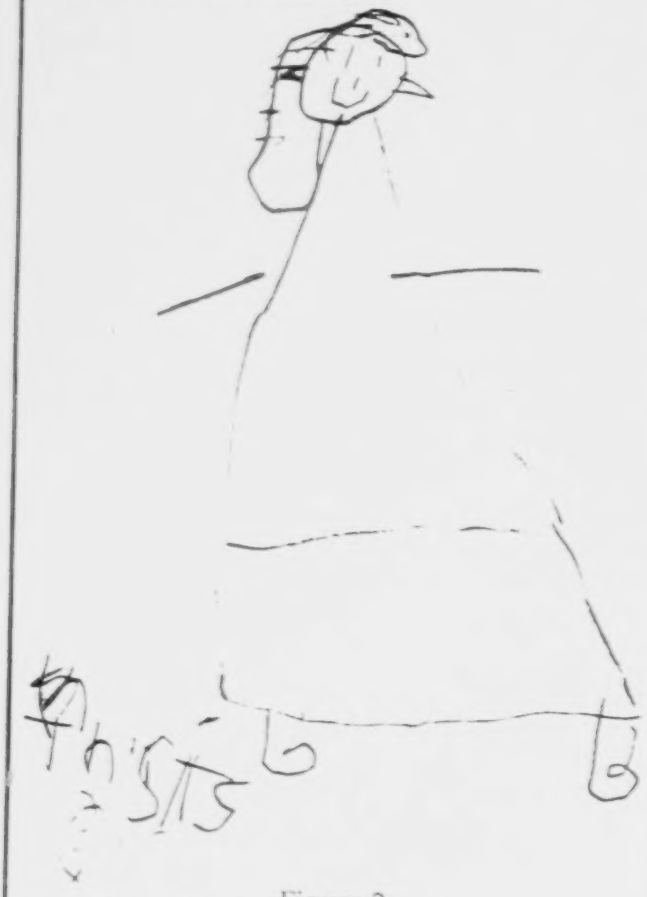

Figure 2
*This is Kimberly. (Child's real name has been deleted)*

As I perused her stories, I realized that Kimberly wrote independently now. I often wondered about Kimberly's progress, unable to know that I'd have that opportunity to find out.

**Kimberly at Eleven**

The following school year, I transferred to a middle school in the mid-city area. One late winter morning, one of the 5th grade teachers knocked at my resource door. As I opened the door, there stood the teacher with Kimberly. And so we began again.

I worked with Kimberly during the rest of her fifth grade year and during her sixth grade year. By this time Kimberly had developed an interest in reading predictable books and fairy tales and writing stories. The texts that Kimberly now produced communicated her ideas in both a more complex and conventional manner. While her main topics still involved family and friends, she no longer used the syntax of the preprimer. As I observed Kimberly writing, she appeared to know what she wanted to say and then did so. I compared this with her previous behavior of drawing a picture and then writing a story to match the picture. Kimberly no longer needed this strategy to organize her thoughts. She seemed to be rehearsing her ideas mentally, rather than with an illustration. While she still illustrated her work, she did so after she had written her text.

Kimberly's texts also seemed to be more reflective of her "voice." Now eleven years old, she often wrote of altercations with her mother, a typical concern with middle schoolers. She also used writing to deal with immediate tasks. The following sample shows how she used writing to tell another student, a boy, that she was not interested in "going with him."

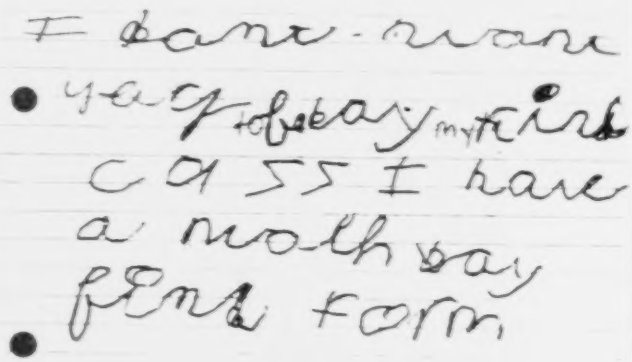

Figure 3
*I don't want you to be my boyfriend cause I have another boyfriend.*

Kimberly's writing also now showed the influence of what she had been reading. During the spring

of the sixth grade year Kimberly wrote the following story after reading a text set about the character in the Bowmar Publications, Monster. Kimberly's rough draft and final draft follow.

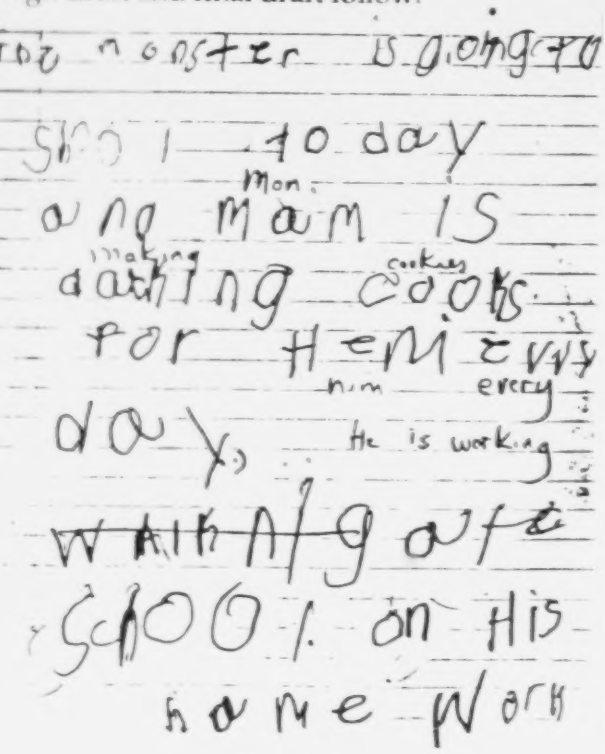


Figure 4

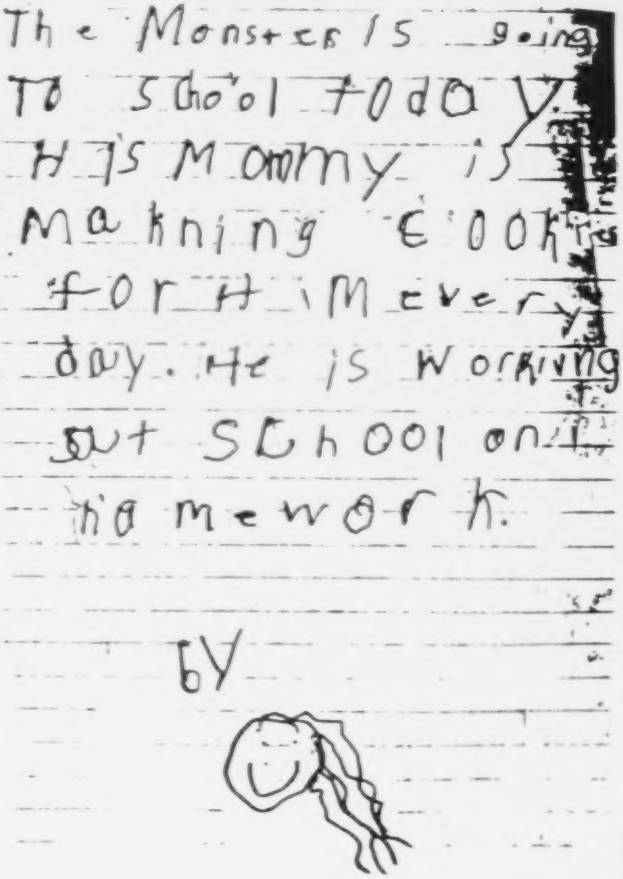


Figure 5

*The Monster is going to school today. His Mommy is making cookies for him everyday. He is working on his homework. By Kimberly.*

While Kimberly's writing looked very dissimilar to her age peers, her writing communicated her message along with indicating that she was also learning the appropriate use of the conventions of writing. By the end of her sixth year, Kimberly had found reading to be a recreational activity as well as beginning to develop the basic literacy skills needed to function in our society. Kimberly understood that she could use language to accomplish needed tasks.

I learned many things about teaching and about learning from Kimberly. During her six years of school, Kimberly transferred seven times. She had been exposed to diverse and inconsistent views of reading and writing. Her learning and language difficulties often created additional constraints as she struggled to become literate. Yet, Kimberly accomplished in her way the goal we have for all learners—to become a reader and a writer and to use those tools to learn about her world. In addition, Kimberly, like all authors, found pleasure in the process of composing and in sharing her published work with her peers and other teachers.

My work with Kimberly also strongly confirmed that most children desire to become literate and will accomplish this in spite of vast difficulties and challenges. A friend of mine remarked that my work with Kimberly became a catalyst for me to learn more about language and language

difficulties. We can often think that the students are the only learners in a class. As I reflect on my years with Kimberly, I believe that I probably benefited the most from our interactions.

## Remembering Andrea

## Growing as a Writer: L.D. and All

by

Susan Stires

When Andrea first answered my question, "Are you a writer?", at the start of our school writing project, she said yes. To the follow-up question, "How did you learn to write?", she replied that she had learned cursive writing in the second grade. Although I knew that Andrea was defining writing in its most basic form, handwriting (Moffat), I also knew that it was a starting point from which our work could proceed. I had chosen Andrea, a fifth grader, as my case study because of my need to understand her problems as a language user and to learn how to help her improve her brief, incoherent prose.

During her first three years in school, Andrea had received language therapy. In third grade she was evaluated by the school psychologist because of her increasing difficulties in the classroom. He found that she had major problems in sequencing, memory, and abstract reasoning, and she was enrolled in the resource room as a learning disabled student. In fourth grade she was dismissed from language therapy, but her resource room program was to include language development. During that year—my first as a resource room teacher—I searched for ways to help Andrea effectively improve her language, writing, and reading comprehension, but with little gain. I felt that I did not have the necessary theoretical background in language and writing development. Fortunately, that same year Nancie Atwell had initiated and developed a school-wide writing project, which began the following summer. During the first series of training sessions I learned what writing is and how it can most effectively be taught. In the fall I began teaching writing and conducting research. As a teacher-researcher in the resource room I examined the specific nature of the writing disabilities of my students, while focusing on Andrea as my case study.

Combining research techniques with process/conference methodology gave me insights into Andrea's writing disability. By being involved with her process as she wrote and by looking closely at everything she did, I found that she needed collaboration during the stage of generating ideas, often called rehearsal (Graves), and during revision. I also needed to be available at other stages of the process—drafting, editing, and rewriting—but to a lesser extent.

### Content Conferences: Generating Ideas

Andrea had few effective rehearsal strategies during the first year of the writing project and our study. She used techniques that her classroom teacher or I taught (brainstorming, time lines, memory chains, poetry forms, and research content area subjects) since she had writing instruction in both settings. She also copied the topic choices and other ideas of her classmates, or drafted without rehearsal. Almost without exception, Andrea needed to go back to rehearsal in order to revise her pieces. Certainly this move is one utilized by many writers, but Andrea had to be shown that this was necessary because she had no notions that her drafts were incomplete and disorganized. She was unable to detect that what she had written was meaningless to her reader. And she was unable to change her writing without response.

When I looked back over the patterns that developed during our first year of writing, I realized that, although I had been focusing my instruction on revision, I had been constantly demonstrat-

ing ways for Andrea to go back to rehearsal: making lists, taking notes, sketching, and most especially, talking. I discovered the powerful effect of talk when Andrea kept a journal of her experiences during an environmental study week in the spring. After participating in a morning of first-hand outdoor activities, which were followed by journal writing, the pages of her journal were filled with clear, first-draft prose.

Another time that Andrea wrote a meaningful first draft was when she wrote to a favorite author, Judy Blume, in March of her fifth grade year. This was the second time she wrote to Judy Blume; she had written before in the fall when a number of her fifth grade classmates had written to favorite authors, but no return letter came. In March Andrea's resource room friend, a sixth grader, wrote to Judy Blume and received a reply. This prompted Andrea to write again. Before she drafted, Andrea took out the final copy of her first letter to Judy Blume from her cumulative folder and reread it. It helped her to generate ideas for her second letter. The first draft of her first letter (Figure 6) was partially copied from her classmates' letters. The first draft of her second letter (Figure 7), although it has the same lead sentence, is more appropriate in content and organization.

September 22, 198-
Dear Judy Blume,
I like your books) especlly iggie . how
how many books do you write ei read
five of your books & like your books alot.
ei read other books too . here is some
other books. winnie the pooh and happy
hollisters encleped brown no place
to hide in other words Charlotte web
sincerly yours

Figure 6

draft

Ms. Judy Blume
c/o Dell Publishing Co. March 22, 19--
New York, New York 10017

Dear Judy Blume:
I like your ~~ei~~ alot ~~esp~~ Iggie's House.
I wrote a letter last Fall. Did you get it? I hope you did,
I wasn't heard from you. Maybe you didn't get it.
I like Freckle Juice ~~that~~ and is a good story. I also read
Tales of the Fourth Grade Nothing & Superfudge, and Blubber.
I like ~~ei~~ all of them alot.
I'd like a pamflet about your books and Send
one home?

Sincerely yours,

Figure 7

During the second year of the writing project and our study, when Andrea was in sixth grade, I focused on helping her become more independent and successful during the early stages of writing. I continued to demonstrate techniques for topic selection and rehearsal, and I provided models—myself and other students—to demonstrate ways for generating ideas. I also did a lot more talking to Andrea, either in one-to-one conferences or in small groups prior to drafting. The purpose of this talk about content was to allow Andrea to re-create the essence and sequence of an experience. Further, I talked with Andrea about the ways that she could generate ideas. The purpose of this talk about process helped her remember the many choices that she had, it helped produce an awareness of the importance of the stages prior to drafting. Finally, I tried to be consistent about pointing out where and how her rehearsal had been effective. As time went by, she was able to tell me where she had been effective.

**Content Conferences: Revision**

When I began teaching revision to Andrea during the first year of the writing project and our study, I concentrated on the organization of her pieces. I asked her questions like:

Does this belong with this?
Where would this go best?
You were talking about this here and then again down here. Should these ideas go together?

At first Andrea merely recopied drafts (Figure 8) with minor revisions coming only after a conference.

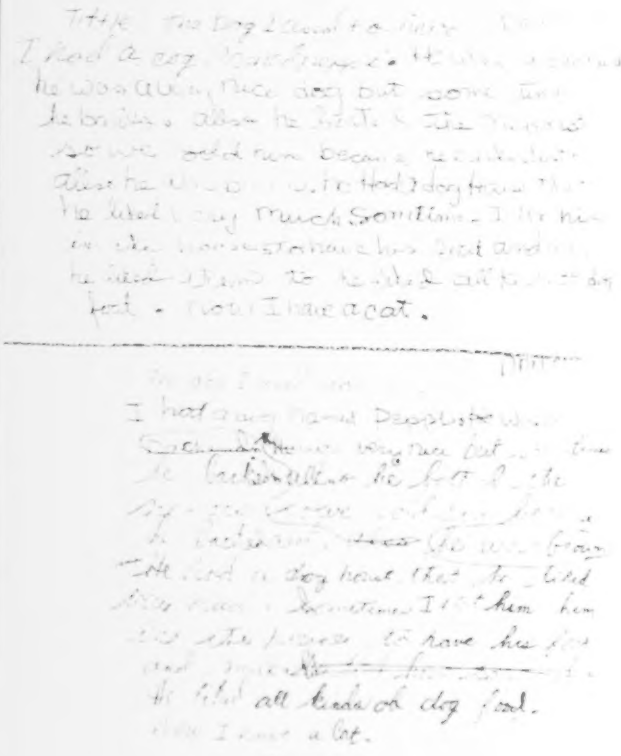

Figure 8

Andrea became increasingly better at correcting organizational problems. She learned to circle sentences, draw arrows, number different parts, underline different parts in different colors, cut apart a draft and tape it back together, or revise by writing different parts on different sheets of paper. By the beginning of her second year of writing she could make any revisions on her own (Figure 9).

Andrea also learned to add to her writing to make it complete, and, in the process, she began to

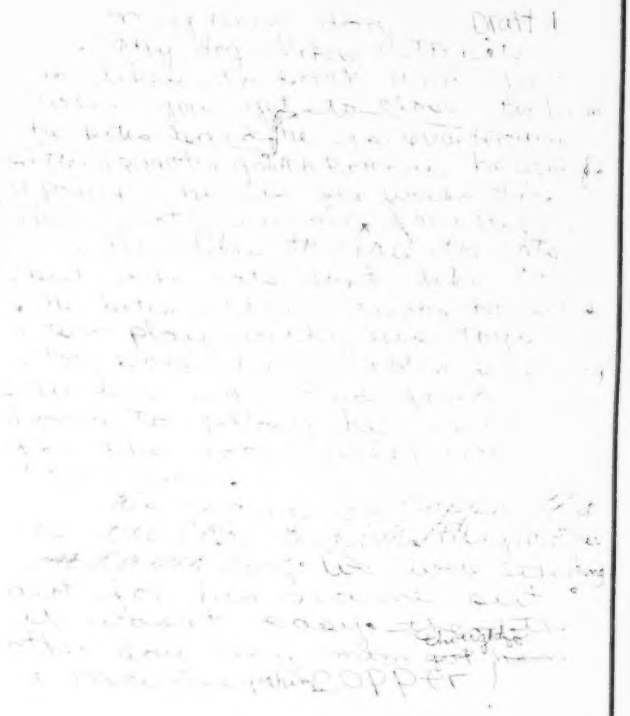

Figure 9

recognize where her ideas were incompletely stated. She learned to add appropriate information and details and to delete irrelevant information and details in order to clarify her writing. The questions which I asked Andrea were highly dependent on the content. They included ones such as the following:

I heard you say — (Paraphrase).
Did you mean — ?
Is there anything else that you know about — ?
Is there anything else that happened when — ?
Was anyone else with you?
Is this important to your story?
Who is "we"?

Although the questions are not unlike the ones that could be asked of any student, I was careful in how I asked them of Andrea because of her needs as a writer and language user. First of all, I had to be highly consistent about my

responses; I had to recognize which questions were the essential ones, the ones that helped her accomplish her purposes without overloading her; I had to give her time and opportunities to talk about what she thought; and I had to give her choices, and not impose my choices by giving direction. In the piece about the day she got her dog, written in the spring of her sixth grade year, Andrea demonstrated her ability to exclude unimportant details in draft one (Figure 10) and include more related information in draft two (Figure 11). Both of the revisions were self-initiated.

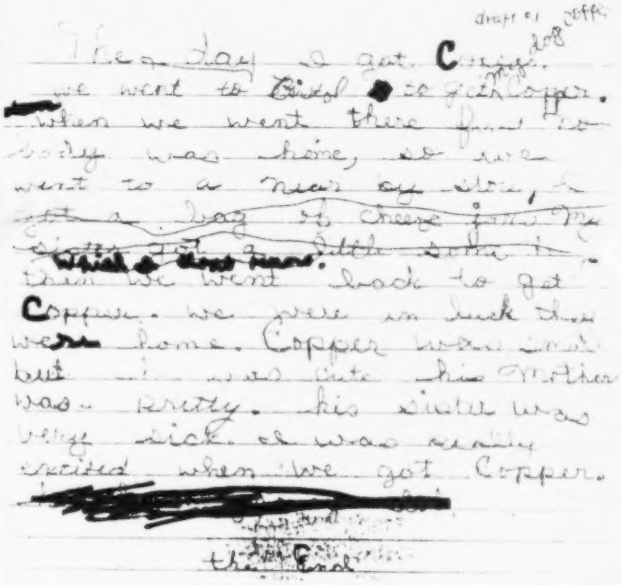

Figure 10

It was important for Andrea to develop ways of putting herself in her writing, rather than record events as an outsider. However, she needed help with how to include her thoughts, feelings, ideas, and opinions in her writing. I asked, in oral and written forms, questions such as the following:

> How did you feel when — ?
> Can you remember what you were thinking about when — ?
> How do you feel about this now?
> What made this special to you?

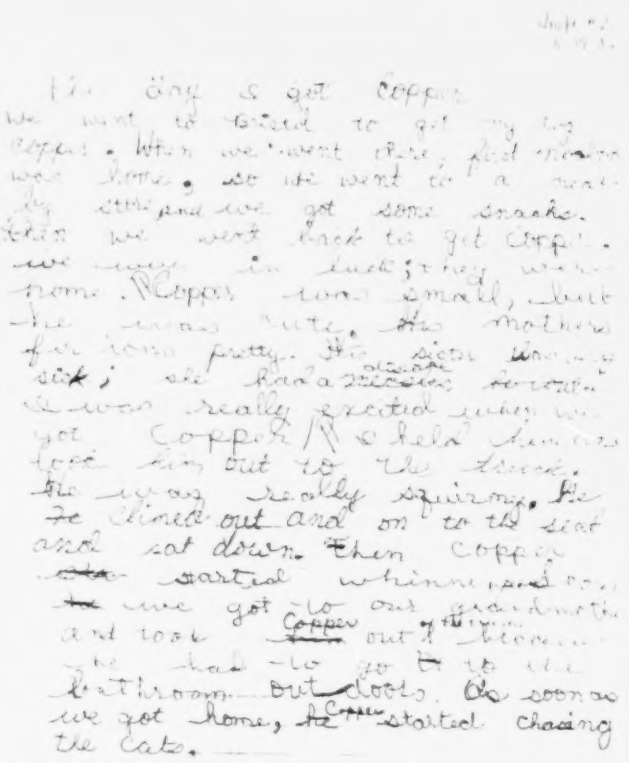

Figure 11

In the final copy of the piece about her new dog, written in the beginning of sixth grade (Figure 12), Andrea writes like an outsider, recording the facts. In the one about the day she got her dog, written at the end of the sixth grade (Figure 13), she is in the piece. She is excited; she is holding a squirmy puppy. Here, Andrea showed growth as a writer; she made a major revision over time.

The other major type of revision I tried to teach Andrea was to look for places where more specific vocabulary or phrasing could be used. My purpose was for her to use the most appropriate or sophisticated language that she was capable of writing. My leading questions for all new pieces were:

> Who is your audience for this piece?
> What is your purpose for writing this?

10-30, K-

My New Dog final

My dog like to bite. he likes to bark and growl. when you get too close to him, he bites hard.

He likes to chase the cats. but the cats don't like it. He likes to play with his toys like the toy bone. He runs for the door when we come home.

He is a quarter Irish-Setter and a quarter Golden-Retriever. He weighs 13 Pounds and he's six weeks old. He's not small for a puppy.

His name is Copper, that is the color of him. My mother named him. We were thinking alot for his name, but it wasn't easy. Then the other day my mom thought of a name for him - Copper!

Figure 12

These questions frequently led to additions and language substitutions. I also asked questions such as:

> Are there any other ways that you can say this?
>
> Are there some other words for — that you could use here?

In a group conference questions like these led to suggestions from other students, as well as responses from Andrea. She usually recorded their suggestions and chose accordingly.

## Process Conferences and Interviews

Along with keeping copies of all of Andrea's writing, observing her writing behaviors, asking her about her writing processes, and reflecting on my observations and talk in my log, I

The Day I Got Copper

We went to Bruce to get my dog Copper. When we first went there, nobody was home. So we went to a Near-by store, and we got some snacks. Then we went back to get Copper. We were in luck; they were home.

Copper was small, but he was cute. His mother was pretty. His sister was sick; she had a disease. I was really excited when we got Copper.

I held him and took him out to the truck. He was really squirming. He climbed out and on to the seat and sat down. Then Copper started whining. Soon we got to our grandmother's and took Copper out of the truck because he had to go to the bathroom outside. As soon as we let him, Copper started chasing the cat.

Figure 13

conducted interviews with Andrea at regular intervals as part of my case study research. I wanted to gain a sense of what she saw happening with her writing. The effect of formally interviewing Andrea, as well as informally asking process questions about her pieces, was that Andrea became more conscious of what she was doing and why. As Mary Ellen Giacobbe has said, "Children grow because they become aware of what they are doing, and then forge on to tackle new issues in their composing."

Throughout Andrea's fifth grade year I asked her who the audience was for each piece. Initially, she copied the topics and audiences that her friends had chosen, or she said that the piece was for herself or her mother. Later, she began to

write for friends or to share with classmates. By the end of the year she was writing for or to businesses, authors, other relatives, and teachers as well as other friends and classmates. During quarterly conferences that year Andrea always stated the spelling was the easiest part of the process for her. Each quarter she designated the hardest part of writing as follows:

1. "getting ideas down and straight,"
2. "getting all the information and including everything,"
3. "organizing my ideas,"
4. "revising."

When I first asked Andrea what one has to do in order to be a good writer, she said that one has to "know letter forms and make sentences." (I could tell that our sentence combining exercises of the year before the writing project had had an effect.) About midyear she included, "thinking of topics and getting ideas down" in her response. In the spring, she said that a good writer: "thinks, makes notes, drafts, revises, writes final copies, proofreads and illustrates."

At regular conferences, I repeatedly asked Andrea what she liked about her piece. She most often replied that she liked the topic, but she sometimes would select out a part that she had worked on particularly hard. At quarterly conferences, I always asked what piece or pieces Andrea liked best. It was difficult for her to choose because she liked most of her pieces, with a few exceptions. Since she invested so much, each piece held a special significance for her. For the entire first year she was unable to say why. She simply shrugged and said, "I just do." During the second year of the writing project and our study she could attach reasons, stating answers like:

"I like this letter because I got an answer to it."
"I like this poem best because it says just what I want it to say."

During interviews I always asked:

"How do you feel about your writing?"
"Are you a writer?"

To the first question she gave the following series of answers as time went by:

"I feel good about what I write."
"I enjoy it."
"I am getting better."
"Good!"
"I wrote forty-two pieces this year."

And to the second question she always answered yes, but her understandings of what it meant to be a writer grew from one who knows how to form cursive letters to one who understands the writing process, from its general application to her specific use of it.

### Some Outcomes

By law, students in special education are to be re-evaluated every three years. In order to update the testing done with Andrea in the third grade, the school psychologist did a psychoeducational evaluation of Andrea in the spring of her sixth grade year. He found a marked improvement in all cognitive areas, and most notably in memory and abstract reasoning. The reasons for this growth are many and complex. I believe that one strongly contributing factor has been writing, specifically using the process/conference methodology. It allowed Andrea, the learner, to take charge of her learning, to think, to choose, and to evaluate. I know Andrea has grown as a language user, as a writer, and as a student. And that is encouraging indeed.

### Conclusion

As we reflect on the stories about Kimberly and Andrea, we recognize the interrelationship between student learning and teacher learning. Their desire to become literate provided a context

for us to question our previous assumptions and beliefs. In our focus on students we often neglect to think about what we learn from them. We hope you view these stories to be as much about us as teachers as about Kimberly and Andrea.

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